
Ex-inmates find services, hope at East St. Louis event

BY CAROLYN P. SMITH

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EAST ST. LOUIS — More than 700 people recently got out of prison, and the state prison system wants it to stay that way.

The Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center in East St. Louis this week hosted a Summit of Hope where those on probation or parole were offered help to return to society in the hope they would stay out of prison. Attendance was the most ever for such an event in Southern Illinois.

James Clinton, of O'Fallon, was locked up for a year. He called the Summit of Hope a great program that left him feeling welcomed back to society.

"A lot of ex-offenders don't know where to go to get help, or who will be on their side. They don't know who to talk to who will give them some hope or direction," Clinton said.

"This event offered me monumental hope. I got everything I need here today. I feel like I am back in society. And, I didn't know I could vote," he said.

More than 80 vendors offering services the ex-offenders need to reestablish themselves at the event, including state agencies that helped them get drivers licenses, insurance, help with children, health screening, housing and jobs. Barbers from eClips in St. Louis and All Styles in Belleville gave free hair cuts and there was free food.

In Illinois, prisoners cannot vote but once they are out on parole or probation their voting rights are restored. NAACP President Stanley Franklin said his group was registering voters because there's misinformation out there that ex-offenders cannot vote.

"Their voices need to be heard, too," Franklin said. "It's their right and we want to make sure they know they can have a say-so in how things are run in the communities where they live and in this country, too."

Aaron Berta, from Granite City said he liked the way the event was put together.

"I think something like this is very much needed. I am glad they did it."

Shannon Tarvin, from Wood River, agreed: "They got a lot of services in there." He said it took him about 30 minutes to get the things he needed.

"Getting a driver's license, renting an apartment, finding a job and furthering education are only some areas in which help is provided," said Tom Shaer, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

Marcus King, senior community outreach specialist for the Illinois Department of Corrections, said the department conducts 22 Summits of Hope each year, drawing 30,000 since 2010. The mission is to help parolees and probationers identify services that can help their re-entry into the community and reduce the temptation to return to crime.

King said the biggest complaint he hears from parolees is, "I can't find a job." King said the vendors at the event were employers who will hire ex-offenders, and there was a new state law giving incentives to employers who hire ex-offenders. Some people were hired on the spot.

"This is a good thing. These men and women have to be able to provide for themselves and their families. We want to keep them from returning to prison. And, having a job is a good way to prevent it from happening," King said.

Tammy Bush-Hamilton, a juvenile justice youth and family services supervisor said she helped organize the event and looked for vendors.

"We brought in colleges, the Salvation Army, and many others who can provide the parolees with the things they need right away," she said.

Because 38 percent of inmates entering Illinois prisons read and do math at the sixth grade level, volunteers escorted the parolees through the event and to the help they needed.

"We did not want anyone to be uncomfortable or to feel embarrassed," King said. "Many parolees do not have insurance or medical cards to get tested or to see a doctor. Most didn't have identification cards or a driver's license. And many didn't know they could vote."

He said some ex-offenders have issues with child support.

"They may come out owing \$100,000 because they've been locked up so long. We want to get them some immediate help. We brought individuals here who can address that issue with them," King said.

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AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, hepatitis C and drug abuse were health issues among former inmates. Two hepatitis cases, some AIDS and some positive drug tests lead to immediate offers of treatment and care.

Shaer said the event can make a difference.

"The Illinois Department of Corrections has lowered the rate of recidivism by 8 percent. That's good, but we believe not good enough. There's more to do," Shaer said.